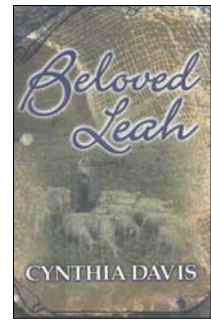


Beloved Leah by Cynthia Davis

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Chapter 1

“Rachel! Rachel!” I looked out the door. No one was in the street in either direction except a couple of boys chasing a puppy.

“Where is that girl? She is never here when I need help.” My question was directed to the serving girl standing in the kitchen. The answer did nothing to ease my frustration.

“I think she has gone to help with the lambing.”

Not trusting myself to speak, I snatched the tray of sweetmeats from the girl. My thoughts were angry as I tromped back to the room where my father sat with his friends. Once again my little sister had managed to slip away when there was work to be done. Not that our father, Laban, ever insisted that she take her woman’s place and learn to cook and weave. He was too proud of her skill with the flocks and herds.

“Leah, don’t you see that her work with the sheep and goats is important?” Often he tried to make me see that she was working.

“She plays with the lambs,” I argued. “She should be here, learning woman’s things.” I was hurt that my father didn’t notice my efforts to keep his home neat and clean. It was my feet that stood for hours at the market haggling over the best price. My hands ensured that food was prepared and on the table when he and my brothers came in from the fields. When my mother died, I uncomplainingly took over running the household. It was Rachel, though, that got the praise for her games with the animals.

Again and again I approached Laban, “Rachel is getting to old to be alone in the fields with the men.”

“Her brothers are there,” he patted my shoulder. “No one would harm her. Soon she will be a woman and then she will have to stay in the house with you. Losing her mother was hard on Rachel. She needs to have this time with the animals.”

I turned away to hide the tears in my eyes. My mother’s death had been hard on me too. I remembered Miriam smiling indulgently at the little girl toddling among the lambs. Even then

I had argued but both parents had laughed indulgently and encouraged her. Now, I was sure that even my mother would insist that Rachel should be acting more like a woman. She was ten and soon the men would begin to look at Laban's youngest daughter with more than casual interest.

Too well I knew that my own square body would never attract the interest that Rachel's long legs and slender figure would. Leaving the men to their meal, I strode back to the kitchen. Angrily I twisted my limp black hair up onto my head. I had a constant battle just to keep it neat. It had a bad habit of straggling around my face. Rachel, of course, had glorious wavy auburn hair. Everyone commented on it.

The only thing people noticed about me were my eyes. It was small comfort that my mother had often told me that my gray eyes were windows into my soul. 'Your heart can be seen in your eyes, my daughter,' she said whenever I complained that Rachel was prettier. 'Like me, you care and love deeply. Those feelings shine from your eyes. Few people are so blessed by the gods.' For a year after she died, I daily stared into her bronze mirror trying to see if there was any difference in my eyes now that my heart was broken. I gave up, finally, when Rachel caught me at it and teased me about being vain. Still I couldn't help overhearing the whispers of the girls at the well. 'Leah is angry today, you can tell by her eyes.' Or 'I wonder why Leah is sad today.' It was embarrassing to have everyone know how I felt just by looking at me. The emotions shown from my eyes even when I smiled and talked about the weather. Now I rarely looked anyone in the face preferring a sideways glance while pretending to be occupied with filling the water jar or passing a tray of food.

A tear of self-pity threatened as I paused to stare out the slit of a window that let in some light and air but kept out most of the wind and weather. Beyond my view, I imagined that Rachel and the shepherds were lazing in the spring sun. The snow still clung to the mountain heights but the valleys were greening with fresh grass for the animals. That was especially good for the ewes with new lambs, Rachel and my brothers insisted. They added that the flock would double this year if the weather stayed fine.

Rubbing my stinging eyes with the back of my hand, I continued into the cool, windowless pit dug down into the ground. Here we kept the wine and cheese. They stayed fresher there. I selected a skin of wine and retraced my steps to give it to my father.

"Where is your sister?" my father's question stopped me at the door.

"With the sheep," I hoped no one would hear the bitter gall in my throat.

“Of course,” his jovial laugh told me that Laban, at least, didn’t notice. “I should have known. My youngest daughter is almost like another son. She is so good with the sheep...”

I didn’t want to hear the rest of his praise of Rachel. My bare feet slapped hard on the dirt floor as I stormed back to the kitchen. The hospitality of the house of Laban would not be compromised even if Rachel wasn’t available to help.

The serving girl helped me arrange the wooden platters of meat, vegetables and bread. We carried them into the room. Deep in conversation, my father barely nodded when I set them down.

“You may go, I’ll clean up,” I told the surprised girl when we returned to the kitchen. With a grateful smile, she slipped out the door. I knew she had a sweetheart among the village boys and would hurry to his side with her unexpected free time.

“I don’t care,” I told myself pouring the scraps into the bucket for the chickens. “I don’t need a sweetheart. My job is to take care of Father.” No one saw the salt tears that splashed onto the pans while I rubbed them clean with sand.

Spring was followed by summer and then fall and winter. In Haran and all of Sumeria we believed that the gods kept the cycles in order year after year. An, Enlil and Enki, the triple gods of creation, maintained life by keeping the heaven, air and water in balance. Im-dugud, god of storms, was welcomed and feared. Welcomed because the rain and snow made the land green but feared because in his rages he would commit terrible destruction. Inanna, the winged goddess of love, fertility and war and Nanna the moon god brought strife and peace to men, women and families. I wasn’t sure that I believed in the many gods but like everyone in Haran, we had a family shrine with the gods that we hoped would bless us. Laban favored An and Inanna although we also had a statue of Im-dugud with his lion-head, for protection against destruction.

On festival days, we all tramped together to the center of Haran. A massive temple was there. Only the priests could climb the steps to the top of the ziggurat where the ceremonial altar stood. It was there that sacrifices were made and religious ceremonies performed. Inside the temple were statues of every faithful person in the town. In that way a constant worshipping presence was assured and the gods were more apt to bless us all. I remembered my grandfather, Nahor, telling me that to the south in Nippur and Ur the ziggurats were bigger and taller reaching to the heavens. As a little girl I couldn’t imagine anything grander than the temple dedicated to

Inanna in Haran. It was the only structure in town decorated with colored cones arranged in geometric designs all around the sides. Even now, at thirteen, I was sure that Haran was the best town in the world.

Sometimes I wondered if it would be any different if there really was only one God like Abraham the Wanderer had insisted. He was my great uncle, brother to my grandfather. Sometimes in the winter evenings, when Rachel asked, our father would tell us stories about Abraham. He told how Abram, as he was known, had traveled with his brother, Nahor, and their father Terah from Ur far to the south. They had all settled here in Haran but Abraham was restless. He was driven by the belief in the One God that he insisted met him in Ur. Endlessly he claimed that he was promised a land of his own. I never understood the compulsion that drove this childless man to travel back and forth from Haran to Canaan to Egypt and finally to settle in Canaan. He maintained, despite years of no children, that this god promised him many descendants. Rachel always pointed out he did finally have a son. Isaac was born when Abraham's wife was nearly 100. 'Too old for children, so it must have been a miracle', Laban's voice always ended the saga with the same singsong words.

So the seasons slid into years. Rachel's twelfth birthday came and went. Still she spent her days in the fields with the men and flocks. I wondered if I was the only one who saw that the child was becoming a woman. It was no surprise when she slipped into bed with me early one morning, eyes wide with some emotion.

"Leah! Sister!" she whispered, tugging my arm.

Drowsily I mumbled something.

"Sister, I think I have become a woman!"

I sat straight up on my mat of skins and blankets.

"What?" I must have spoken loudly for she put her hand over my mouth.

"Hush, I don't want Father to know. He won't let me go with him to sell the sheep today if he finds out."

"You'll need the rags," ever practical, I dug out a supply of the monthly cloths for her.

"You cannot go with Father today," I made the statement fully expecting an argument. Instead she threw herself into my arms, sobbing.

"I don't want to be a woman and be shut away for a week at a time once every moon turning."

Awkwardly, I patted her back. Even as a baby, Rachel had been so self-assured she never wanted the hugs I had desperately wanted to give her. Now, I gathered her slender form into my hungry arms.

“There, there, sweet sister, it isn’t so bad. This means that Father will begin to look for a husband for you.”

“I don’t want a husband,” she wailed forgetting to be quiet. “I want things to go on as they were. I want to tend the sheep and go with Father and...” another sobbing fit robbed her of words.

The curtain was pulled back. Laban stood in the doorway rubbing his eyes.

“What is the problem?”

Before I could answer, my sister flung herself at the man.

“Say I may still go with you to the market,” her words were tinged with hysteria.

“But, why? What?” His eyes sought mine over her head. I suppose he thought I had been scolding my sister. His hand stroked the auburn hair that rippled down her back.

With a shrug, I held up the monthly cloths and said, “Rachel has this night become a woman.”

The emotions that played across the man’s face almost brought a smile to my lips. His fatherly love fought with the lifelong cultural training that said the girl in his arms was untouchable at this time.

“My daughter,” as gently as he could, he disengaged her arms from his neck. “You are now a woman and must begin to act the part of an adult. This is a great night,” he intoned. “We will celebrate your coming of age.”

I took her slender form into my arms again.

“It’s not fair!” Rachel sobbed over and over. “I don’t want a Feast! I want to go to the market with you! I want to go to the fields! I don’t want to be a woman and be married!”

With a last look at the two of us, Father backed out of the room. He shook his head as he considered the turn of events. Perhaps it was the first time he realized that he had two marriageable daughters to deal with. I knew that the men of Haran would waste no time petitioning for Rachel’s hand. I wondered who would be found for me. It is the law of Innana, the goddess of love, that the elder must be wed first.

Rachel and I spent the day together. Gradually she became calm and we talked about womanly things. I was surprised at how much she appreciated my taking over the role of mother and homemaker.

“I could never do all that you do. The daily baking and cleaning and washing would make me crazy,” she confided.

“You’ll have to learn so you can do all these things when you have a husband and children,” I reminded her.

“No,” stubbornly she shook her head; “I plan to continue to watch the sheep. You don’t need a husband to be a shepherdess.”

I shook my head since I was sure that even our doting father would insist that Rachel act the woman’s part now. To divert the conversation I started planning the celebration of her womanhood. She couldn’t resist the idea of a party in her honor with the new tunic and the trip to the temple for a special sacrifice.

“You will see that being a woman is not so bad,” I coaxed. Because she quit arguing, I thought she finally agreed to give up her idea of being a shepherdess.

During the next week of excitement, ritual and revelry, I tried not to compare the elaborate ceremony to the simple one-day observance of my coming of age.

“My mother had just died,” I explained when a new slave girl, Zilpah, asked me about it one day as we prepared yet another banquet for the endless party. Rachel was in her element with the local girls attending her and leading her into the dances that were such an important part of the celebration. A hard knot formed in my heart, though, when I saw the young men staring at my little sister. I saw several of them approach Laban but in each case he shook his head. Eagerly I looked forward to the end of the week when Rachel would take her proper place with me in the household duties.

Rachel got her way, of course. I don’t know how she convinced my father, but except for one week each month, she was allowed to be in the fields with the sheep. The men of Haran stopped petitioning Laban for her hand. I tried to ignore the whispers from the older women when I went to the well and market. Each of their words was a barb that sank into my hardening heart.

“There she goes, Laban’s oldest daughter. Such a shame, her father can’t marry her to anyone.”

“Do you know? The little sister is exiled to the fields until he can find Leah a husband.”

“Rachel is so lovely, there would be no problem getting her wed.”

“My own Abdam asked to make her his wife.”

“I heard even the son of the chief, the *Gal*, has approached Laban.”

The shearing was complete and the summer heat was starting to set in. I overheard my brothers talking to my father.

“We must start using the well tomorrow. The *Gal* has spoken. The brooks have dried up until the later rains come, Im-dugud willing.” It was Joshih who spoke.

Laban nodded, “That is good. This is the time of alliance among all the flocks and herdsmen.”

Cabel, my oldest brother laughed, “We have to help each other. That stone over the well is too heavy for any one man to move.”

As I listened I remembered my one visit to the flock well. It was called *Gal-beer* because only the chief of Haran could order its use. I remembered my father telling the story of how it was first dug by his grandfather when he came to the area.

“He saw that the land was rich and the hills offered protection. So Terah settled here with his sons Abram and Nahor and their wives and his grandson Lot. He called the name of the town Haran after the son who died in Ur. Terah and his sons dug this well so that the animals would not suffer or need to be driven far in the heat of the summer. When others came and settled in Haran, the stone was put in place as protection against misuse.”

It was a monstrous slab of rock that covered the top. Father explained to me that the stone kept the well closed until all the flocks were gathered. In that way no one could steal extra water for his herds. The huge boulder took two or three strong men to move it. The drawing of the water into the troughs took extra time. The men would not want food until after dark.

It was rather nice to have the extra time to prepare the evening meal. I told Bilhah and Zilpah, the serving girls, that we could wait until the shadows started to lengthen and the air began to cool before preparing the food platters. We talked about many things while listening for the sounds of feet and the mixed baaing of sheep and goats as Rachel brought them into the nightly enclosure.

The lions, bears and wild dogs in the hills made it unsafe for unattended flocks to be out at night. Many shepherds slept with their animals in the fields but Laban had wisely forbidden

Rachel from doing so. Only during the week when Rachel wasn't allowed to be in the fields did Joshih and Cabel watch over all the animals and keep them in the fields at night with their own animals.

"It is too much trouble to sort out your flocks from ours and bring just some into the fold," they argued and Laban agreed.

"Until the gods send a husband to watch the flocks, Rachel will watch my animals with her brothers' help."

"Pray the gods send a husband speedily," Joshih joked.

I added my prayers to his because surprisingly no suitor had come forward for Rachel. At least none that I knew of. Without the possibility of Rachel's betrothal, I knew I had no chance of ever being married. Perhaps it was her easy, friendly way with the men or the fact that they looked on her as a comrade and not as a bride. Maybe Laban was too cautious in his views on a husband for his beloved baby. For whatever reason, Rachel remained happily unattached.

One hot day I looked up from my kneading trough, pausing to wipe the sweat from my forehead and tuck a straggling hair back behind my ear. What I saw made me jump up, my heart leaping in fear. Rachel was running full speed down the street.

"Father, Father!" I heard her voice. She did not sound frightened, just excited. I relaxed slightly even as Laban rushed past me.

"What is it? Where are the sheep?" His eyes scanned the road behind her.

She caught his hand, panting and impatient. "At the well. Listen, the most amazing thing has happened!"

I left my bread to join the group.

"Come inside, you are making a scene," I urged. Curious faces were appearing in doorways up and down the street. My mind could already hear the whispers and titters at the well in the morning. Every woman in town already thought Rachel was scandalous for being a shepherdess. Now this display of unseemly behavior would add to their gossip.

"Come inside," I tugged her arm. She shook off my hand angrily and turned to Laban.

"You don't understand! Father, your sister Rebekah's son has come."

"Rebekah!" I saw my father's eyes grow soft remembering the little sister who went to the wild unsettled land of Canaan to be the bride of Isaac, the miracle son of Abraham the Wanderer. Sometimes he talked about her strong will. He compared her beauty and spirit to

Rachel. 'Like you, my daughter, your aunt Rebekah knew what she wanted. When Abraham's servant came seeking a bride, she didn't hesitate. Eagerly she agreed to go with him back to Canaan. She told me that was what the One God wanted her to do because she was the one who answered Eleazar's prayer at the well.' In my heart I admired her courage. Going off into the wilds to marry a man she had not even met took bravery. That she believed the strange One God of Abraham wanted her to wed Isaac was even more amazing to me. I wondered what her son was like and why he was here now.

"Rebekah," Laban repeated, "has a son?"

"Yes! He is here! Now! At the well!" Rachel punctuated each sentence with a tug on her father's arm. "Come and meet him! He rolled away the well stone so the flocks could be watered. He kissed me," her eyes grew wide and dreamy as her hand rubbed one cheek, "and called me his beloved cousin!"

"I must go and welcome him!" The man started rapidly up the street with Rachel dancing beside him.

They left me standing in the middle of the street. With a proud lift of my head, I ignored the curious eyes that now focused on me. Outwardly calm, I turned back to my house. My hands and teeth were clenched tightly. I allowed myself only a brief moment of anger, smashing a vase of dead flowers against the wall, before walking to the kitchen. Bilhah and Zilpah were waiting; eyes wide with unanswered questions.

"It seems that we will have company for dinner." The calmness of my tone surprised even me. "Our cousin from Canaan has come. We have much to do."

I began outlining things that needed to be done. "Bilhah, you clean and straighten the main room. There is a broken vase to be picked up."

The girl hurried to her task.

"Zilpah, see that fresh water is drawn to wash our guest's feet."

She grabbed a jar and scurried off to get the water.

"I will see about a festive meal. There are plenty of vegetables and the bread was just ready for the oven. Fortunately, the lamb was prepared yesterday." Muttering instructions to myself, I patted the bread into shape and slid it into the round oven outside. Then I set about slicing meat and vegetables. Soon Zilpah, then Bilhah joined me. In the silent camaraderie of women at an urgent task, our hands flew. Even as we heard Laban's voice and the animals in the

enclosure, we put the finishing touches on an elegant meal. The bread, piping hot and nicely browned, was piled on a tray at the last minute.

“Here we are, son of my sister,” I heard my father’s voice echoing through the house. “Let me welcome you into my humble home. Here is water to wash the dust of travel from your feet and hands.”

“My lord uncle is most kind,” I heard a pleasing voice reply.

“Come, be seated, I am sure my daughter has some fine feast prepared to honor your coming.”

I heard a note of awe in the visitor’s voice, “Rachel, my cousin, has prepared a feast also?”

“My older daughter,” Laban clarified the situation. It was my cue. I turned to pick up the tray of bread and nearly ran into Rachel. How she had managed to pen the flock, wash her face and hands, change her dress and comb her hair in order to be standing in *my* kitchen, holding *my* tray of bread was a mystery I never solved.

“I’ll take that,” I hissed, anger mounting at her presumption.

“I just want to help,” her lips formed a familiar pout and a tear glistened in the corners of her eyes.

“Then bring the wine,” I ordered. “It is my place, as elder, to take the bread of hospitality.”

For a minute I thought she would argue, but then she shrugged and took the jar of wine from Zilpah. Gracefully, as though she carried it everyday, she balanced the jar on her shoulder. It made me angrier to see how womanly she looked. Her gown flowed around her figure so simply and her hair glistened in the lamp glow. I swallowed hard and led the way to where my father and cousin reclined on cushions. The serving girls followed with the meat and vegetables.

My first sight of Rebekah’s son made my head whirl and my knees shake. I understood Rachel’s sudden helpfulness. To say Jacob was handsome is to say that the Euphrates is a steam. From his brown curly hair to the broad shoulders and gentle smile above the thick beard he was perfection. I carefully set the bread down in front of my father and lowered my eyes hoping no one noticed my stare.

“Jacob, you have met Rachel. This is my elder daughter, Leah.”

I wished he hadn't made it sound like I was ancient and past hope. Belatedly I realized that unlike Rachel, I had not had time to change my flour dotted dress. My face, too, no doubt had flour streaked across it and I knew my hair was straggling around my face, as usual.

Gallantly, the man rose to embrace me.

"Cousin Leah, I had no idea that I would find such a welcoming family here in Haran. Here I find my uncle and my two cousins, the beautiful and friendly Rachel and Leah of the lovely eyes."

"Welcome to our home," I managed to whisper above the pounding of my heart. He had noticed my stare. I hoped that my admiration hadn't been too evident in my eyes. "We will leave you to your meal."

Rachel hesitated before following. I thought she was going to beg to stay with the men. Instead she gave a graceful salaam and trailed after me to the kitchen.